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No. 183

22 August 2013

US-CHINA SUMMIT MEETING BRINGS SIGH OF RELIEF TO JAPAN

Hiroyuki Akita

Japan's perspective on US-China relations is a complicated one.

The Japanese government asks the US government, "Are important talks going on between the US and China without our knowledge?," to which the US replies, "No need to worry. Japan and the US are allies, after all."

This kind of back-and-forth has long taken place between the two countries. What, then, was Japan's take on the June US-China summit meeting?

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The Japanese government felt a bit uneasy upon receiving advance notice of the itinerary of the American and Chinese leaders. From Japan's standpoint, the US seemed to be giving China very special treatment with a one-night, two-day stay in a California resort for face-to-face talks between President Obama and President Xi Jinping lasting more than eight hours.

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the US in February, President Obama set aside less than two hours to meet with him. The Japanese government was disturbed by the great disparity in the welcomes accorded Prime Minister Abe and President Xi

Once the meeting was over, however, the concerns of the Japanese government for the most part dissipated, the biggest reason for this being President Obama's statements on the Senkaku Islands and historical issues.

According to sources in both the Japanese and US governments, President Xi spent about an hour criticizing the Japanese government's purchase of three of the Senkaku Islands and insisting that Japan had not accepted Chinese calls to shelve the territorial issues between the two countries.

President Obama did not go along with these views, objecting that the US would not sit by as its ally Japan was threatened by China. He reportedly took a very clear stance on not tolerating Chinese provocations toward Japan.

The Obama administration has heretofore declared that the Japan-US Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands as well and has made clear its support for Japan. At the same time, it has quietly asked the Japanese government to exercise restraint to prevent tensions from rising in the East China Sea. Some in the Japanese government saw in this a sign that the Obama administration was backing away from China.

Just the fact that President Obama looked President Xi in the eye and urged him to stop provoking Japan was a better-than-expected result from the Japanese perspective.

President Obama's statement on Japan's historical issues also garnered high regard from the Japanese government. During the meeting President Xi had made reference to the recent words and deeds of Japanese politicians in warning that Japan was swinging to the right. President Obama nevertheless

insisted that he trusted Japan as a democratic state and that Japan and the US were key allies. He did not fall for China's attempt to split Japan and the US on the historical issues.

Prime Minister Abe's responses to questions in the Diet in April about such matters as the definition of "invasion" sparked criticism not only in China and South Korea but in the US as well. The US government even went so far as to convey its concerns unofficially to Prime Minister Abe about his remarks on historical issues.

President Obama's statement does not mean that the concerns regarding Japan's stance on historical issues have disappeared. Even so, it was of great significance for Japan-US relations. Translating its meaning very liberally, the message from President Obama to President Xi was essentially the following:

"The US is not very worried about how Japan interprets the past because such historical discussions ultimately take place within a democratic framework. Japan as a democratic state differs from China under one-party rule."

There can be little doubt that President Xi found this point to be the most bitter to hear of all the remarks by President Obama.

China cannot share "democratic values" with the US. Nonetheless, it believes that it can build cooperative relations on par with the Japan-US alliance and the US-Australia alliance by sharing "the interests of great powers" with the US.


For all practical purposes, though, President Obama responded to China's approach with a resounding "no." No matter how much the interests of the US and China coincide, China cannot enjoy a genuine friendship with the US, as do Japan and Australia, unless it democratizes.

That said, it is not true that the US and China cannot become good partners. The topics on which the US and China can cooperate and deal as major powers and as permanent members of the UN Security Council span the globe, including the North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues, the Syrian situation, global warming, trade and international finance.

Regular cooperation will create the leeway for the US and China to form somewhat of a close relationship. President Obama's aim in inviting President

Xi to California and examining him from head to toe like a doctor was undoubtedly to discern just how much cooperation he could expect from him.

Will President Xi put a lid on nationalism domestically and lead China to the status of a responsible major power? If so, this would also serve Japan's national interests. Rather than swinging back and forth emotionally over developments in US-China relations, Japan should work together with the US to ensure that China becomes a responsible major power.

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Hiroyuki Akita is a senior staff writer of the Nikkei Newspapers.